

SUMMARY  
BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

MORTALITY  
*BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS*



# **Summary of “Mortality” by Christopher Hitchens**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

An anthology of wisdom about death and dying.

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# Introduction

“Today is your best day!”

“Live every day as if it’s your last!”

These catchy slogans are often marketed at human beings, encouraging us to cherish the gift of life. And although they’re certainly correct in their intentions, the sad reality is that their trite and pithy nature often invites dismissal. We shrug off well-meaning messages and forget the true value and blessing of life. By contrast, we regularly take our blessings for granted and complain our way through the days, naively assuming that we have an endless number of days stretching out in front of us. It’s only when we are confronted with something truly life-altering-- like a terminal diagnosis-- that we genuinely begin to consider the fleeting nature of our lives. And only then do we start to appreciate the temporal beauty of our existence here on earth. That’s what Christopher Hitchens discovered after his cancer diagnosis in 2010. And over the course of this summary, we’ll explore his journey of self-discovery throughout his two-year battle with cancer.



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# Dying is Awkward

This might seem like something of a cavalier understatement, but it was one of the first things Hitchens learned after his diagnosis. Because so many people are afraid of death and unsure of what to say, he quickly learned that his prognosis made his family and friends awkward. So, he started to think about why that is. One thing he noticed was that the subject of death makes people awkward because many people prefer to avoid thinking about it. Even though we know we'll all die someday, it's easier to avoid thinking about it until we absolutely have to. And Hitchens realized that he was in exactly the same boat. Because even though he knew he was sick, he preferred not to think about the fact that he was dying until that reality slapped him in the face. Once he was forced to confront that reality, people around him had to do the same. And as Hitchens struggled to cope with the fact that he would miss so many important moments in the lives of his family members, the people around him were forced to consider the fact that they would one day do the same.

His family and friends therefore coped with this difficulty in different ways. Some of his friends tried to stay relentlessly positive; they didn't know what to say, so they tried to tell him motivational stories about people who had beaten cancer. But when this was all they said, Hitchens began to feel that their positivity was a bit toxic. It felt as though they were trying to ignore the reality of what was happening to him or that they were putting a positive spin on it because there was something shameful about him dying. He felt the same way about well-intentioned friends who used toxic positivity to encourage him to "keep fighting." Hitchens felt that all of this added up to an avoidance of death and he didn't like it. He decided that he wanted to push past the awkwardness and confront the reality of what was happening to him. He tried to help others grow more comfortable with the idea as well by being honest and telling jokes that put people at ease.



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# Nietzsche Was Wrong

As an intellectual and author, Hitchens had a keen interest in philosophy. He was particularly interested in the works of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. You might be familiar with Nietzsche's famous saying that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Although people often forget to attribute it to Nietzsche, this phrase has become inexorably intertwined in popular culture and is often depicted in popular songs, poems, and wearable art. However, Hitchens found that this saying didn't necessarily apply to him. Because of course, when Nietzsche made that statement, he was referring to the dark night of the soul, not a terminal illness. And although we might be able to triumph over a personal struggle, emerging stronger than ever before, that's not necessarily the case with cancer.

Some people certainly do beat cancer and their success should be celebrated. But the reality is that that simply isn't true for everyone. Sometimes, when a diagnosis is terminal, people will eventually succumb to the cancer. And rather than being made stronger, they are weakened by a prolonged and exhausting battle. That's how Hitchens discovered that encouraging someone with the phrase "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" isn't always helpful. Because this mentality can sometimes frame death and illness as a personal failure on the part of the cancer patient. This encouragement may be well-intentioned, but in the end, it is also unrealistic. Sometimes people are simply weak and sick and sad and it's okay to accept that reality. Instead of trying to encourage people to be "strong," try to support them where they are and give the freedom to be tired and weak.

As his illness progressed, Hitchens found that he needed that genuine support and freedom more than anything. Because although he wasn't afraid of dying, he was afraid of growing weak and losing the qualities he most prized in himself. He knew that illness was a slow progression and he knew that he would likely lose himself along the way as he grew weaker and his intellect was supplanted by the pain. He was scared of facing a slow, drawn out death and he knew that his illness would never end in him growing

stronger. So, he knew that he needed support now more than ever. He also knew that he needed genuine support, not empty promises that encouraged him to believe that he could beat his disease or that this was somehow a positive thing.



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# What Happens When We Die?

Many of us ponder this question at one point or another but it never weighs on your mind as heavily as when you have a terminal diagnosis. As you literally stare death in the face, you have no choice but to consider what's waiting for you on the other side. And Hitchens' experience was no different. But this question was especially intriguing for him because he had been an atheist his entire life. Although he was deeply curious about what would happen when he died, Hitchens never doubted or surrendered his beliefs. He never asked himself if he was wrong to be an atheist or if he should make a last-minute profession of faith. If anything, he felt that doing so would likely make him a shallow and insincere person on a number of levels. On one hand, if he clung to certain beliefs his entire life and surrendered them immediately in the face of adversity, that reflected poorly on his character and on the sincerity of his beliefs. And if he made a profession of faith as a "get out of hell free" card, that didn't say much for the sincerity of his newfound "faith" either. So, rather than being wishy-washy and abandoning beliefs as it suited him, Hitchens chose to stick to his guns. He had been an atheist all his life and he decided that he would die as a proud atheist as well.

However, his commitment was not shared by the general public. In fact, many of his friends and family members confessed that they were worried about his soul and pressured him to make a profession of faith. Other friends told him they were praying for him and attempted to convert him to Christianity. Likewise, strangers on the internet placed bets about his eternal destiny, arguing that any atheist would "finally accept Jesus" on his deathbed. Hitchens was bemused and puzzled by this concern from people he had never met. He wondered why they cared so much about his eternal destiny. He wondered why Christians were so obsessed with ensuring that everyone embraced their beliefs. He especially wondered why some people were so bold as to write to him to say that he would "burn in hell" for refusing to "trust Jesus." Despite this pressure, however, Hitchens remained firm. He was proud of his legacy and his resolve and he wanted to die knowing that he had remained committed to his beliefs.

He was especially proud of his commitment to atheism when he saw how much religion hindered medical advancements. Over the course of his treatment, Hitchens had the opportunity to enter an experimental new therapy program that had the possibility to cure him. Of course, he eagerly pounced on the opportunity, only to have his chances of survival dashed by religious zealots. At first glance, that description might sound a bit extreme, but wait until you hear what happened! Cancer affects hundreds of thousands of people every year and an overwhelming amount of scientific research has been dedicated to understanding and beating this disease. Despite this, however, we still don't know precisely what causes cancer or how we can beat it. And that's exactly why we need experimental treatments that can further our understanding. Stem cell research big part of that experimental treatment and a Dr. Francis Collins was exploring this option when Hitchens was diagnosed. Collins' experimental study hinged on stem cell research and Hitchens could have been part of that study. If it had worked, he might even have been cured.

Unfortunately, however, the study was never allowed to begin. That's because some religious zealots protested due to their hatred of abortion. They believed that abortion was murder and that it was therefore wrong to use the stem cells of aborted babies for medical research. Never mind the fact that these cells would never be used for any other purpose. Never mind the fact that these cells could save lives. The only thing they cared about was their vision to defend the "rights" of the unborn. So, a federal judge in Washington, DC ruled that stem cell research projects had to stop. Hitchens was appalled at this and felt that, in this case, religion caused more harm than good.



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# Hitchens Learned What it Was Like to be Voiceless

How many words do you use per day? Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever thought about how much you talk or how much you rely on your voice? Most of us have never considered these questions because we take our voices for granted. We're so accustomed to enjoying our ability to talk that we never imagine what life would be like without our voices. But Hitchens discovered that horror for himself on a firsthand basis. As he endured the chemotherapy treatments, Hitchens grew progressively weaker. And eventually, between the treatments and the degenerative nature of his illness, he lost the ability to speak. The loss of his voice was a terrible shock to Hitchens. As an author, thinker, and political speaker, he was an extremely talkative person. His entire life had been built on the power of his voice. When he was robbed of the ability to speak, he suddenly felt as though he had suffered a crisis of identity. Who was he without his voice?

His loss motivated him to explore that question in greater detail and ponder the impact of the voice on the human experience. He discovered that the ability to express yourself verbally is such an integral part of the human experience that it is extremely painful to exist without that capability. If you can't communicate, you feel isolated and excluded from the rest of the world. You are forced to listen to others forever, while being unable to contribute anything to the conversation. Without language, how can you tell a joke, connect with others, or share your thoughts? Losing his voice was a terrible blow for Hitchens and it motivated him to write even more as a means of expressing himself. It also motivated him to encourage others to use their voices while they could and to cherish their ability to speak.



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## Final Summary

Death is something that affects every living being in the world, but we prefer to avoid this topic as much as we can. We smother the reality of death under pithy quips, motivational slogans, and jokes. But in the end, we have to acknowledge the truth of our mortality and come to grips with what that means for every individual. Christopher Hitchens devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge and self-expression and he was determined to do so throughout his illness as well. As he slowly succumbed to esophageal cancer, Hitchens documented the thoughts and truths that occurred to him with the intent of using his voice to help others.



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